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Some Psychological Characteristics of the Delaware Indians during the 17th and 18th Centuries

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Introduction

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The Relation of Parents to Children

Data on the relationship of the mother to the infant and child are meager, but they suggest that the mother was, in addition to her role as provider and protector, the agent of considerable frustration. This frustration, however, was not so recurrently severe as it was continuous. Instead of presenting the infant with any sudden major crisis, the mother was consistently indifferent to a number of particular lesser demands.

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Parents may have had some unconscious hostility to the new-born child: certain compulsive rituals had to be performed to prevent "wandering ghosts" from stealing away the soul of the infant.[1] The baby was, from birth until it was able to walk, bound to a cradle-board, from which it was normally released only for sanitary administrations. The mother nursed the child by picking it up with the board.[2] It was often left alone, on the board, swinging upright from a tree limb, while the mother worked in the corn-field or did other outdoor tasks. Many children are reported to have died while propped up in the board against a bench or wall in the houses. "The children by pushing and kicking not infrequently tumbled themselves into the fire or other danger and thus miserably perished, or were severly burned," observed

1. Harrington, 1938, p. 129.
2. Lindestrom, 1656, p. 201.
3. Zeisberger, 1778, pp. 85-86.
4. Lindestrom, 1656, p. 202.

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155 Zeisberger.[3] Infants were described by
854 Lindestrom as never crying.[4] Whether this was because they were nursed whenever restless (which is most likely), or because the crying was consistently ignored in early infancy, is not clear from the available accounts. From Zeisberger's description of the frequency of the mother's absence, it would seem that, even if the child were nursed on demand when she was available, her frequent absences must have meant to the child that she was an
862 undependable provider. Children were weaned at the age of two or three; the techniques are not described.[5] Anal and
863 urethral training do not seem to have been strenuous: boys wore no clothes at all until
[241] the age of five or six, although girls wore aprons as soon as they could walk.[6]

861 Zeisberger noted that children were
155 sometimes harshly treated, although such behavior generally produced in them "bitterness, hatred and contempt." He went on to say, "The women are frequently guilty of thus raising their children to anger, for the women are often ill-tempered. By way of punishment, they will pour water on the children or thrust them into the water."[7] Zeisberger did not like the
[157 Indian women, whom he described also
181] as being "much given to lying and gossiping. They carry evil report from house to house. As long as they are observed they appear modest and without guile. All the wrongs of which they are guilty are done
114 in secret."[8] While one may be inclined to
797 discount Zeisberger's accusations on the grounds of the natural prejudice of a male missionary among somewhat more aggressive women than he was probably accustomed to at home, the general accuracy of his observations and the fact that he was really fond of his charges, with whom he spent much of his active life, suggest that he had imbibed the prevalent native male attitude toward the women of the tribe.

5. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 80.
6. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 17.
7. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 81.
8. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 124.

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581 Divorce and family instability were
586 common; many children were raised by mother surrogates. "Owing to instability of the family relationship, children are
581 often neglected."[9] The father was absent,
855 hunting, fishing, fighting, trading, or attending treaties during most of the year; what discipline there was fell to the hand of the mother, who was considered to
796 "own" the children.[10] During one of the
861 annual calendar of ceremonies, young children were chased by a man dressed in a bear-skin, who threatened to punish them for misdeeds (of which the parents kept him informed from year to year) by carrying them away in a bag full of snakes.[11]
[776] This "Mask Spirit" was considered to be the "Guardian of the Game" and also promoted the fertility of the corn; in other
955 words, was the symbol of the food provider.[12] The boys were able to escape from the mother's supervision as soon as they were able to get about to play at hunting and fighting; but the girls were kept around
754 the house to help the mother at work.[13] When a child died, an old woman was often accused of having bewitched it.[14]

155 It would seem that the mother-figure
593 remained a symbol of possible delights which could not be secured on demand, a symbol of diffused frustration, of withheld benefits and hidden hostility, to the Delaware, and the source of his generalized, if inhibited, aggressiveness; and that the father-figure stood on the horizon, so to speak, as a powerful, friendly being, but one too remote and too aloof to be depended upon.

Emotional Attachments in Maturity

584 The ideal in marriage was for a young man to fall in love with a girl. His family would present his suit; she would accept
[585] him by accepting the presents he sent, and come to live with him; and they would live happily and faithfully ever after. The

9. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 21.
10. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 14.
11. Harrington, 1938, pp. 52-53, 113.
12. **Ibid.**; Harrington, 1921.
13. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 16.
14. Zeisberger, 1778, p. 128.

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562 fulness, in comparison with the men, may
157 have been owing to the fact that they were much more restricted in childhood than their brothers. Nowhere in Delaware society was there the model of anyone
592 with coercive authority; neither mother nor
622 father ruled the roost at home in an
625 authoritarian sense, the sachems had no power to enforce their wishes, and there was no conception of a state with police
586 powers. Divorce was easy and frequent and could be initiated by either party simply leaving the other.[36] Supernatural
776 beings were not Jehovah-like Gods who regularly punished the wicked and rewarded the good; the Delaware reckoned rather with a supernatural guardian spirit who acted as a comrade and friend who would assist his mortal protege in critical passes. Shame and pride are more frequent themes than guilt and self-righteousness;
577 Speck (referring to twentieth-century Oklahoma Delawares) says, "Spiritual purity . . . is not conditioned by ethical conduct, but rather . . . through the observance of taboo regulations prescribed by ancient rulings."[37]

155 It would seem to be a fair inference that
597 the Delaware often did not develop a strong authoritarian, coercive conscience; moral values (which certainly were recognized) did not possess an awesome, mosaic character; "good" and "bad" had a light affective tone.

114 Zeisberger, who as a Moravian believed
626 in less discipline and autocracy than was fashionable in eighteenth century Europe, was still puzzled as to how a society without authority could hold together. "Judged by the mere appearance of the Indians," he wrote, "one is surprised how modest and careful they are in relation to each other and imagines that the whites, if they were as free a people and had neither government nor punishment to fear, would not
626 be as united and peaceable as the Indians appear to be."[38] This superficial smooth-

36 Heckewelder, 1819, p. 154; Zeisberger, 1778, pp. 20-21.
37 Speck, 1931, p. 51.
38 Zeisberger, 1778, p. 122.

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855 receiving from their mothers adequate physical care, especially in early infancy, but that the child did not receive much of what we would call "affection" or "love" and from time to time was neglected and subjected to petty meanness. The father had only intermittent contact with the mother-child nexus, and to the child appeared as a distant potentially loving (and perhaps also potentially threatening), but practically [861] remote figure. Neither parent made use of systematic punishment as an educative technique. The male child grew up into an adult who saw women both as 86 romantic ideals and as untrustworthy 562 and malicious, potentially witches, while men were regarded as potential comrades, toward whom nevertheless highly polite, circumspect behavior was required in order to avoid giving offense. Women grew up to be discreet but covertly malicious wives and mothers. No individual of either sex was conceived as [571] the possessor of unquestioned authority, and social relations hence were very individualistic and fissionable. There is • 155 evidence to suggest that the individual remained somewhat fixed, on an unconscious level, to infantile patterns of "oral" reaction, of a dependent, aggressively demanding nature, although these dependency patterns were masked by a superficial individualism and self-sufficiency, and by careful inhibition of any openly aggressive behavior. The conflict between the dependent and aggressive impulses, on the one hand, and the conscientious efforts to be self-sufficient and unaggressive on the other, was partially resolved by the guardian spirit complex, a technique of personality integration which allowed the adolescent to collect his dependency wishes and displace them onto the fantasy figure of an all-powerful parent. Further relief was afforded by various institutionalized ritual or semi-ritual institutions, such as warfare, feasting, and religion. Liquor, however, was a severe threat to the integrity of the society, since it allowed repressed and sublimated im-

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155 pulses, particularly aggressive ones, to break out into the open, often with socially catastrophic results.

It should be observed that in many respects this personality portrait of the Delawares is similar to that drawn, from different sources, by A. I. Hallowell for the Indians of the Northeast in general, and more particularly for the Ojibwa.[56] Thus Delaware personality is not markedly distinct from that of other Indians in the area, and a closer analysis than is possible here would probably be required to distinguish it from Ojibwa or other Algonkian peoples of the Northeast.

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56. Hallowell, 1946.

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